

## Nationalist Netizens in China: Online Historical Memory

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**Abstract:** The Chinese government is currently performing a delicate act of balance: attempting to foster a “healthy” nationalism among the young generation in China while, at the same time, having to deal with the at times rather loud and uncompromising expression of this nationalism online. By examining examples of online debates on issues of national interest; in this case the Spratly Islands and the animosity between a Chinese and a Japanese child, this article discusses the use of historical imagery in online historical debates and demonstrates a linkage between the version of Chinese history promulgated in the so-called patriotic education campaign and the rhetoric used online. Even though the viewpoints expressed in the two debates vary widely, the central theme of how to deal with China’s past plays a strong role in both debates. I argue that though the Chinese government has been rather successful in promoting this reliance on a certain historical perspective to understand present day China’s place in the world, the online nationalist expressions take on a life of their own partly due to China’s very special internet culture.

### Introduction

We insist that patriotism should be expressed rationally and in line with the law. We do not agree with irrational actions that violate laws and regulations. The Chinese people will convert full-hearted patriotic zeal into concrete actions to do their own work well and help maintain the stability of reforms and development.  
China’s Foreign Ministry, quoted in *People’s Daily* October 25, 2010<sup>1</sup>

In 2008, the world was confronted with a new group of Chinese citizens: the very vocal young nationalist netizens, protesting against western media coverage of the Lhasa uprisings and against what they called the denigration of the Beijing Olympics when the torch relay was disturbed in France. Online protests spilled over into real life, as demonstrations against the French

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supermarket chain Carrefour and confrontations between patriotic Chinese and Tibetan protesters along the torch relay route in Europe turned increasingly ugly. It is unclear what would have happened if the confrontations had continued to escalate; but the Wenchuan earthquake in May 2008 changed the focus of international media and Chinese netizens alike.

In the aftermath of the earthquake, the patriotic wave took a new direction. In a country where any large scale public gathering is viewed with suspicion by the state, the outpourings of public grief following the earthquake were an unusual phenomenon. China was overflowing with flags at the time – they were sold on every street corner in preparation for the Olympics – and as people looked for ways to express their sympathy with the disaster victims, the flag as a symbol of national unity became a focal point in the manifestations of shared grief. Where the Chinese flag had been waved by angry young men protesting against France and CNN a few weeks earlier, it was now held by crying students during memorial ceremonies at their universities or waved by quite ordinary citizens in Tiananmen Square during the nationwide three minutes of mourning a week after the earthquake. Similarly, people spontaneously started cheering *Go China, Go Sichuan* (*Zhongguo jiayou, Sichuan jiayou*) after the three minutes came to an end, turning a slogan used for sports events into a public expression of sympathy and national unity.

As the events of 2008 demonstrate, nationalism in China is a multi-faceted phenomenon that keeps evolving as China's relations with the rest of the world changes. For the last century, the development of a "healthy" nationalism has been seen as one of the most important tasks for the Chinese government, but the interpretation of what constitutes a healthy nationalism has been subject to change. At the beginning of the twentieth century, Sun Yatsen included nationalism among his three principles of the people (Mitter, 2004) and stressed the importance of turning the fragmented Chinese population into a unified nation, while Mao Zedong argued that it was possible to be a patriot and an internationalist at the same time in the struggle for national liberation (Mao 1938). In the early years of the People's Republic of China, emphasis was placed on the symbolic victories of revolutionary heroes (Wang, 2012). Today, Chinese school children attend patriotic education classes in national studies emphasizing China's long history and the country's suffering at the hands of imperial powers during the "Hundred Years of Humiliation". While these classes were supremely unpopular in Hong Kong and actually had to be taken out of the curriculum, studies suggest that they may have an effect on mainland children, who express

higher level of loyalty to and pride in the Chinese nation than their parents' generation (Du, 2010).

In this article, I will examine the Chinese government's delicate act of balance: fostering a "healthy" nationalism among young Chinese while, at the same time, ensuring that the expression of this nationalism is kept within reasonable bounds to avoid an increasing public pressure towards a more assertive foreign policy and the consequent damage to China's international image. As the quote at the beginning of this paper shows, this is by no means an easy task as nationalism has become a double-edged sword in China. On the one hand, the nationalist fervor plays an important role in legitimizing CCP (Chinese Communist Party) rule in China and filling the ideological vacuum in today's increasingly market-oriented society. On the other hand, the quick reactions and overwhelming anger of the young nationalists limit the Chinese government's space for maneuvering in foreign policy making. I argue that this challenge is partly caused by the preferred form of communication for China's young nationalists: the internet. While the Chinese government's control over the internet is very efficient (see for instance Zhu et al., 2013), patriotic anger has remained one of the "safe" topics where the so-called *angry youth* (*Fenqing*) have been allowed to vent their feelings. Also, the role of the internet as a free space where Chinese youth can develop an "elastic self" (Wang, 2014) and the divide between real life personality and online persona means that the version of patriotism/nationalism made public on the internet is quite radical. As long as the protests remain confined to the internet the consequences are limited, but as soon as the protests move into real life, in the form of demonstrations, boycotts, and damage to Japanese property, the organizational capability of the online forums serve to increase the scope of the incidents thereby pressuring the Chinese government into a more assertive foreign policy and the consequences can become very real indeed.

I will begin by establishing a theoretical framework for the phenomenon called nationalism and discussing the distinction between patriotism and nationalism – which are perceived as very different phenomena in China. I will then examine the sources and expression of today's nationalism through a discussion of two very different internet debates on nationalist issues; one dealing with the disputed Spratly Islands and one with a misbehaving Chinese child, which will provide an intimation of what the very special shape of the Chinese internet landscape

means for the current impact and future prospects for the desired development of a “healthy” nationalism among China’s young generation.

### **Ancient Nation – Modern Nationalism**

Chinese nationalism has been followed with great interest by western and Chinese researchers alike long before the events of 2008 brought the new wave of cyber-nationalism to the attention of mainstream Western media. China’s long and winding path to modernity and nation-state status is reflected in the many faces of modern Chinese nationalism. As Lucian Pye once claimed, China is a “civilization-state, pretending to be a [nation-]state” (Pye, 1992). This discrepancy is caused by modern Chinese history, where the multicultural Qing Empire formed the basis for the development of a modern Chinese nation-state, thereby creating a difficult task for later rulers of China, who faced the challenge of transforming a civilization into a unified nation. After the 1949 revolution, the CCP created a political view of the nation that attempted to define China as a unified but multi-ethnic nation. Chinese history was presented as the history of the Chinese Nation (*Zhonghua Minzu*) originating in the Yellow River Basin and retaining its unique cultural characteristics throughout China’s long history while incorporating various ethnic groups. This version of Chinese history serves to present a picture of a multiethnic yet culturally unified nation, held together by loyalty to the unique Chinese culture since time immemorial.

As Benedict Anderson’s classic definition of a nation reminds us, a nation is under all circumstances constructed by its members in an era where modern mass media and public political participation created the opportunity for sharing a national identity:

...it [the nation] is an imagined political community – and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign. (Anderson, 1991: 6)

Anderson then goes on to define nationalism as a cultural object along the lines of gender or religion (Anderson, 1983). However, other definitions are perhaps more to the point, when discussing the current wave of popular nationalism in China. For instance, Ernest Gellner considers nationalism a political ideology that holds that “ethnic boundaries should not cut across political ones” (Gellner, 1996: 1), while Anthony D. Smith defines nationalism as “an ideological movement aiming to attain or maintain autonomy, unity and identity for a social group which is

deemed to constitute a nation” (Smith, 1991: 51). These two definitions of nationalism actually points to some of the difficulties in creating the desired “healthy” nationalism in China. Gellner stresses the importance of matching political and ethnic boundaries, while Smith does not speak of ethnic boundaries but of a “group deemed to constitute a nation”. Considering China’s long history as a multi-ethnic empire, where the precise limitation of the empire was not defined so much by national boundaries but rather by the extent of the emperor’s power, which would ideally encompass “all under heaven” (*tianxia*), helps understand why China’s transition to a modern nation-state has been long and tortuous. The definitions can also help understand some of the difficulties encountered in generating a healthy patriotism/nationalism in China as the task of determining which group is actually “deemed to constitute a nation”, and challenges to China’s territorial claims are some of the issues that spark the patriotic outbursts in China today.

As described above the official Chinese definition of the Chinese nation (or *Zhonghua minzu*) is inclusive and broad enough to contain the dominant Han majority as well as the minority nationalities. Care is taken in China to include colorfully dressed minorities in official ceremonies, as for instance the children representing every ethnic group in China carrying the national flag during the opening ceremony of the Olympic Games in 2008 – though in this case it was later revealed that the colorfully dressed children actually belonged to the Han majority (Spencer 2008). Some studies also show a high degree of loyalty to the Chinese nation-state among minority youngsters. However, loyalty to China is combined with pride in their own minority identity, so that an ethnic identity as a Tibetan or a Uighur is combined with a national identity as Chinese for these students (Tang and He, 2010). Despite the relatively high degree of loyalty to China, ethnic separatism will always be a risk in a multi-ethnic state and the present version of nationalism promulgated through school curricula is intended to promote national unity, not ethnic identity:

We are the most populous country in the world. The population of our country constitutes a fifth of the world’s population. For various reasons, there are also very many Chinese persons residing abroad and becoming foreign citizens. No matter where you go in the world you will meet yellow-skinned, dark-haired, dark eyed “descendants of the yellow emperor”. Within our great territory in the large national family, there are 56 fraternal ethnic groups living together in harmony. We are the only country in the world, where so many ethnic groups constitute one country. (Su, 1994: 31. My translation)

This textbook definition of the members of the Chinese nation in terms of kinship (*descendants* of the Yellow Emperor, *fraternal* ethnic groups, national *family*), but also physical characteristics (skin, hair and eye color) is an example of how the challenge of integrating multiple ethnicities in one nation is met in school textbooks. The ethnic variety found within China's borders and the disputes surrounding these borders, all point to the difficulty in translating the Western concept of nationalism into Chinese where the term patriotism (*aiguo zhuyi*) is much more commonly used.

The distinction between patriotism and nationalism is somewhat contested. While scholars of Western nationalism often do not distinguish between the two, or when they do tend to conclude that “we” are patriots while “the others” are nationalist zealots (Billig, 1995), in a Chinese context it is often felt necessary to distinguish, not least because of the very different connotations of the two Chinese words *aiguo zhuyi* (patriotism or literally love-country-ism) and *minzu zhuyi* (nationalism or ethnic-group –ism). The term *minzu zhuyi* was used by Sun Yatsen at the beginning of the twentieth century as one of his three principles of the people at a time when the ethnically Chinese population had just overthrown the foreign dynasty, the Manchus. While he did stress the importance of creating a united Chinese nation from the five major nationalities (Han, Mongol, Manchu, Tibetans and Muslims), the term still tends to emphasize the ethnic component of nationalism. After the Revolution in 1949, the CCP changed the focus of the nationalist rhetoric to direct it against foreign imperialism rather than the Manchus. Today, *minzu zhuyi* is often used to refer to historical versions of nationalism or to ethnic nationalisms in other countries, while *aiguo zhuyi* is consistently used to describe contemporary Chinese nationalism. While about 92 percent of the Chinese population officially belongs to the Han majority, the remaining 8 percent ethnic minorities live in some of the more contested areas of China (Tibet, Xinjiang, etc.), and any ideology that stresses the ethnic component of nationalism would be dangerous to the unity of China.

In a study of patriotism/nationalism amongst Chinese youth, Gries et al. distinguish between the two concepts defining patriotism as “Love of or attachment to country” and nationalism as “the belief in the superiority of one's country over other countries” (Gries et al., 2011:2) and proceed to document an empirical difference between the two concepts using the results of surveys among university students in China and the US. Whereas nationalism and

patriotism cannot be empirically distinguished in the US in their study, in China it is possible to distinguish between “patriots” (who are proud of being Chinese, but do not necessarily support their country if they do not agree with a concrete policy) and “nationalists” (who finds that their own country is better than the rest of the world and that the surrounding world would be a better place if it would only learn from China). While their study certainly documents interesting varieties in Chinese nationalism, there is nothing in the definitions of nationalism discussed above that makes such a distinction necessary. Both the patriotism and nationalism from their survey results can be encompassed by the broader definition of nationalism as a political movement stressing the unity and sovereignty of the nation. Distinguishing between a relatively rational patriotism and an arrogant nationalism resembles the Chinese government’s distinction between healthy and unhealthy forms of patriotism, while I argue that it is more meaningful to see this as varieties of the same phenomenon and not two separate -isms (for a further discussion of the distinction between nationalism and patriotism, please see Bislev and Li, 2014). For the purposes of this paper, I will continue to refer to nationalism without attempting to distinguish between patriotism and nationalism while all the same keeping in mind that the phenomenon I am describing here would often be referred to as patriotism, not nationalism, in Chinese.

### **Why Does Everybody Bully China? Historical Memory and Nationalism in China**

The quest for a healthy version of nationalism is not only a government endeavor in China. In the essay “Let China Submit to My Mood”, Wu Jiaxiang (2011) observes that current popular nationalism in China is very dependent on historical memory, and especially the memory of past humiliations in its imagery and ideological content. He distinguishes between a healthy nationalism oriented towards the future and exemplified by the types of nationalism promoted by for instance Sun Yatsen and Gandhi, and an unhealthy backward-looking nationalism represented by Hitler and Mussolini that is dependent on historical imagery and visions of former glory. Wu attributes this backward-looking version of nationalism to the popular nationalism expressed in the books *China Can Say No* (Song et al., 1996) and more recently *China is Unhappy* (Song et al., 2009). However, as Christopher Hughes argues, it is impossible to separate state and popular nationalism in China completely, as the Chinese state’s reliance on patriotic feelings to generate social cohesion plays an important role in engendering popular nationalism (Hughes, 2006).

The reliance on historical memory to incite patriotic feelings is present in the so-called *patriotic education campaign*. In the aftermath of the student demonstrations in 1989, the Chinese government instituted this campaign in order to instill proper values in the students who had been fascinated by Western democratic ideals. Since 1991, Chinese students have been presented with patriotic education in school curriculums (sometimes known as *national studies* or *Guoxue*). The campaign has been called the largest mass campaign in the history of the PRC, but what distinguishes this campaign from earlier mass campaigns is its sophistication in terms of the involvement of many different media platforms and the fact that the campaign has now been in effect for more than 20 years despite leadership changes (Wang, 2012). The campaign consists of the rewriting of history books to emphasize both former glory and the humiliations suffered at the hands of western powers, of a long list of so-called *patriotic education bases* (*aiguo zhuyi jiaoyu di*) – historical sites deemed to be important to an understanding of China’s history, as well as the designation of various cultural products (movies, books and songs) as recommended and patriotic (Wang, 2012). Looking at the original list of patriotic education bases which only included 100 locations, it becomes clear where the intended focus lies; only 19 sites promotes the glories of China’s imperial history, while 40 sites are dedicated to wars with the outside world (Baik Baidu, 2013).

The combination of pride in former imperial glory and a focus on humiliations suffered at the hands of foreign countries during the transition from empire to nation state has led to the description of China as a “Pessoptimist nation” (Callahan, 2010) or as a nation suffering from a superiority and an inferiority complex at the same time:

The unshakable idea that China remains a great civilization fuels a comfortable superiority complex and makes the vast majority of Chinese optimists, for they must believe that it is only an anomaly that things are as bad as they currently are, and in the future greatness will inevitably return. (Pye, 1990:74)

This dichotomy between a sense of the rightful place of China as a great nation, and past humiliations that have not yet been appropriately settled is also very apparent in the version of Chinese nationalism that is currently found on various online social networks.



### Online Nationalism: China Bullied and China Bullying

In the wake of the 1999 bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade, a forum called Strong Nation Forum (*Qiangguo Luntan*) was created on the People's Net, to allow Chinese citizens to express their outrage at the incident (Wallis, 2011). The establishment of this forum, which is currently still active, signaled the beginning of the phenomenon known as cyber-nationalism in China today. Wu Xu defines cyber-nationalism as

a non-government sponsored ideology and movement that has originated, existed and developed in China's online sphere over the past decade. It is a natural extension from China's century-long nationalism movement, but it is different from both the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) official version of patriotism, and the traditional Chinese nationalism movement. (Wu, 2007: 2)

As Wu points out, the version of nationalism found on the internet in China is by no means a copy of the state nationalism promoted in the patriotic education campaign and in official media.

Figure 1: Patient comments

"China is strong but has plenty of formidable foes. The army must be very strong otherwise we will come to grief."

"There will be a time when the whole world will know that China cannot be bullied, and that the Chinese people will not be pushed around. But the time is not ripe yet."

"Forget the buoy, cool your tempers and develop the economy. Wars take capital"

However, there are important areas where the two versions of nationalism overlap, and where the imagery of the version of nationalism promulgated by the Chinese state leads to the violent outburst associated with online nationalism, as can be seen in the discussion following a small news item posted on Weibo<sup>2</sup>. This news story retold a story from Vietnamese media regarding the Spratly Islands, which is at the center of a

territorial dispute between China, Vietnam, Malaysia as well as other Southeast Asian nations. It was published on February 8, 2014 and referred to Vietnamese media's reporting of an incident where the Vietnamese navy had spotted a buoy dropped by a Chinese navy vessel close to the Spratly Islands and then proceeded to remove it as soon as possible. The story was told in a completely neutral tone, was not confirmed by official Chinese sources, and no mention was made of any attempts to replace the buoy or political repercussions. Within the next couple of

days, the story elicited more than one hundred comments, many of them focusing on the humiliation of being “bullied” by such a small country. However, the comments differed in the extent to which they used this story to criticize China’s current regime, ranging from a small minority of patient or understanding comments (represented in Figure 1<sup>3</sup>) over sarcastic and

Figure 2: Disillusioned comments

“Why does everybody come to bully China?”

“Why is our motherland always bullied by small slave nations – countrymen unite!”

“China is so weak and surrounded by enemies on all sides, anybody will dare to bully [China], even Vietnam that tiny rotten egg is bullying [China]”

“Where do these small countries get the nerve to bully present day China?”

“Even the Vietnamese come to bully us, I’m speechless”

“This is too fucking embarrassing”

“Hit [them]”

“Strong nation? Ha Ha”

angry comments containing no overt criticism (Figure 2), to comments directing their criticism directly at the lack of action from the Chinese leadership (Figure 3).<sup>4</sup> The comments also range from urging direct aggression, as in the one simply saying “Hit [them]” (*da*), to the resigned “Strong nation? Ha, Ha.” A general trend in the discussion is the repeated use of the word “to bully” (*qifu*) and the general feeling that China is always mistreated in international affairs. There is little mention of concrete historical events, but a general sense of historical grievances, where embarrassment figures prominently. While there is a marked difference in the level of aggression or resignation in the comments

and in the extent to which the netizens are actually prepared to declare immediate war on Vietnam (or for that matter the current Chinese leadership), there were no comments in this debate questioning China’s right to the Spratly Islands, the relevance of the debate, or even the significance of this relatively minor event. Even the comments labeled patient are moderate only to the extent that they urge patience and say that the time is not ripe yet for action.

There is always a methodological challenge involved in using randomly selected internet debates as empirical material for an analysis of the nationalist attitudes of China’s young generation. We do not know who are behind the posts shown here, and it is difficult to claim representativeness of such a small sample as the one used here. Even large scale online surveys do not necessarily paint a comprehensive picture of the attitudes towards patriotism found online

in China as the survey participants are often not representative of the general public. For instance *Global Times* did a survey with more than 8000 respondents in the fall of 2013, showing that 85.4% of the respondents considered themselves patriotic with the remaining 14.6 % either not considering themselves patriotic or being undecided (*Global Times*, 2013). However, a closer look at the characteristics of the respondents show us that they are predominantly (92.9 %) male

Figure 3: Critical comments

“The nation is surrounded by people bullying it, and all that can be said is: We strongly condemn it”

“Fuck, we are bullied to this extent and still do not dare to hit back”

“Cast it out again! Send the navy to drop another buoy. Let’s see if they still need a lesson. We do not fight little Japan, we do not fight the Philippines, we do not fight Vietnam, Whom do we dare to fight?”

“If the old generation of leaders was still here, would those fucking small countries dare to encroach on our territory, look at the present day where everyone encroaches on us, oh poor Chinese people”

“I can only say that the only thing the present rulers dare to hit is their own ears”

“Even though I do not hope that there will be a war this year, but I would like to see if the party is really changing. When push comes to shove, it is not what you say, but what you do that counts!”

and also older than the average internet user in China (45.9 % of the respondents in the *Global Times* survey are above 40 years of age, while only 18 % of the Chinese internet users are more than 40 years old (CINIC, 2013). Also, the *Global Times* is known as a gathering place for China’s cyber-nationalists (Weatherley and Rosen, 2013), so the survey can only be used to confirm that readers of the *Global Times* do indeed consider themselves patriots – not to say anything about the general attitudes of Chinese netizens.

The scope of the conclusions we can draw from the debate above is therefore limited. What the comments do show us is that while there is a discussion of the topic, the discussion

is mostly concerned with two issues. First of all, the overwhelming sense of grievance felt by the participants in the debate that to a large extent is based on the sense of the loss of face suffered by the large nation China, when smaller nations act in a disrespectful manner. Secondly, the feeling that the Chinese government could and should do more to right these grievances is pervasive. It is interesting that there is no discussion of the importance of the event, nor a single comment saying that this is irrelevant, or questioning the veracity of the story as it is not confirmed by official

sources. The actual buoy episode is hardly mentioned, but is simply seen as a continuation of a long historical trend that will only be righted once China is strong enough to “stand up”.

It is very important to point out that the type of comments seen above only expresses the more virulent version of cyber-nationalism and that other topics will spark a different type of debate. For example, a Chinese family shared the story of a visit by Japanese friends on *Douban*, a Chinese social network service.<sup>5</sup> The Japanese family had a young child of the same age as the son of the Chinese hosts. Throughout the visit, the Chinese boy bullied the Japanese child and it all came to a head when the Japanese boy showed the parents how his Chinese playmate had taught him to say “I’m a little Jap who deserves to die, I apologize to all Chinese” (wo shi gai si de xiao Riben, wo duibuqi Zhongguoren) in Chinese. While there is no way of testing the veracity of the story itself, what is interesting here is not so much the narrative as such – even though it can be seen as an example of how a seemingly trivial incident of bullying is turned into a question of national character and patriotism. What is more relevant here are the comments left by anonymous netizens. Below you will find translations of a selection of comments:<sup>6</sup>

1. “[I] Read it...educational issues really deserve to be considered deeply”
2. “Every time I see incidents that incite nationalist hatred, my heart goes cold. We cannot forget past humiliations, but neither can we pass on the seeds of hatred through eternity. Making use of historical hatred to hurt innocent people is idiotic.”
3. “When looking at Chinese patriotism I always laugh. I also love my country, but not in this manner. How can the country be anything but foolish when burdened with an old organizational system and a conventional mass education system.”
4. “The educational system is the biggest difference between us and developed nations and also the most difficult thing to change.”
5. “To those of you who loot stores and steal electronic goods while holding high the banner of resisting Japan. Do your own thing, but do not corrupt our children.”
6. “[...] I agree with the other comments - what is called “universal love” is definitely not forgetting national humiliation, which would be a weakness, while this is true self-strengthening.”
7. “A small child does not develop this type of hatred on its own; it can be attributed to the influence of the surroundings as well as the teaching received in school and at home.”

8. "I salute this Chinese child, he is a shining example. Maybe Japanese children are well-educated and well-behaved, but this is not what is important. What is important is what is right and what is wrong. Japanese aggression towards China was wrong, no matter how kind Japanese people and Japanese children are, this will always be wrong [...]."
9. "(Replying to the comment above) The Japanese did do many terrible things, but these are old scores from several decades ago. War is in itself merciless [.....]"
10. "When our revolutionary forefathers gave their flesh and blood to resist foreign aggression it was done in order to fight for a peaceful future, not to have their descendants infused with hatred from birth. They definitely hoped that their sons and grandsons would grow up in a stable and healthy society, receiving the best education, to let China grow strong enough to withstand violations [.....]."

These comments illustrate a completely different type of debate than the Spratly Islands debate discussed above. The two most important issues become the Chinese educational system (no. 1, 3, 4, 7 & 10) specifically the history education and the distinction between forgetting past humiliation (which is also seen as a mistake in this debate) and learning to live with it through a realization that the humiliations are a thing of the past and that the Japanese child described in this story is definitely not responsible for the sins of his ancestors (no. 2, 6, 9 & 10). Only after several comments do we see a contribution commending the Chinese child and vilifying the Japanese, and the following comments all disagree with that position.

The debates discussed above have been selected in order to demonstrate the very different sort of reactions you can find from Chinese netizens on topics of nationalist significance. Even though the representativeness of debates such as the ones discussed above can be questioned, studying online nationalist commentaries is important for several reasons. First of all, the internet has rapidly become the *de facto* public sphere in China, the place to turn to in order to get an impression of public opinion (Weatherley and Rosen, 2013). We have no way of ensuring to what extent these debates express the general opinion among larger parts of the Chinese population, not least because of the specific shape of Chinese internet culture, where netizens often play with multiple identities and develop an "elastic self" to participate in what has been called an "online carnival" (Tricia Wang, 2013, Cockain, 2012). As they deliberately play with the constraints surrounding their real life identity, the expression of radical nationalist viewpoints

online may only be part of their internet persona and not viewpoints that they would actually defend offline. But even though the viewpoints are at least expressed in a stronger fashion online than they would be offline, they are highly visible and therefore play an important role in shaping public opinion. This visibility is the second reason for studying the online debates – they are also very visible to the Chinese government, and several researchers have pointed to a linkage between strong public opinion as a domestic constraint and Chinese foreign policy making. For instance, Wang Zheng (2012) demonstrates how increased public knowledge and historical sensitivity on certain issues has led the Chinese government to take a more confrontational stance in its US policy, while issues that are kept out of the media's spotlight can be resolved relatively peacefully. James Reilly (2012) demonstrates how public opinion influences China's foreign policy towards Japan, while Kang Su-Jeong (2013) finds that the domestic political situation during the leadership transition between 2001 and 2006 led to a more tolerant attitude towards popular nationalist outbursts which again led to a tougher policy towards Japan.

While the debates represent what we could call opposite sides of the nationalism spectrum, they still have two things in common. First of all, the enormous importance attached to history and the stereotypical use of historical rhetoric. In the Spratly debate, it is the word “bullying” that keeps recurring, referring to the way foreign powers have behaved in relation to China during its modernization process as well as to the buoy incident. In the second debate, it is repeatedly felt to be necessary to comment on the importance of remembering past humiliations (for instance no. 2 & 6) – but without inciting the type of nationalist hatred demonstrated by the young child in the story. Even though the debaters by and large argue for a conciliatory attitude towards Japan, many of them still feel the necessity of stating that national humiliation must never be forgotten.

Secondly, there is an undertone of criticism towards the current regime in both debates. In both debates there are comments expressing a certain level of nostalgia for former revolutionary leaders, and questioning whether the China of today matches the intentions they had, even though the conclusions they draw are quite different. In the Spratly debate, the nostalgic comment expects that the old leaders would never have tolerated the type of bullying that China suffers passively today, while the comments in the Japanese child debate centers on the wish for a stable and healthy society not dominated by hatred. The rest of the critical comments differ. In the Spratly debate, the call is for a more activist government that will not tolerate humiliations, while

the criticism in the Japanese child debate centers on the state-led educational system. The critical voices heard in the debates all fall within the type of comments that Lagerkvist and Sundqvist (2013) have called *loyal dissent*, comments that question certain policies and offer criticism of specific issues, but do not overtly challenge the Chinese government's leadership.

## Conclusion

Benedict Anderson claimed that the development of print capitalism was necessary in order to spark the development of the modern nation-state and the consequent rise of nationalism as a cultural phenomenon. Today, we are witnessing how another technical development, the rise of the internet, is once again influencing the development of nationalism not least because of the increased visibility and the organizational scope of the online movements. However, it is also important to remember that local internet culture actually affects the specific shape of the online debates. Understanding Chinese internet culture becomes of primary importance in understanding the nationalist outbursts online. What makes online nationalism so extremely interesting is the fact that it is an example of an ideology that is actively promoted by the Chinese government, but where the online version is gradually becoming more and more critical towards the very same government. When official news bulletins and even weather forecasts stress that disputed territories such as the Spratly Islands belong to China, they are actually generating an increasing sense of frustration among the patriotic young generation.

The present wave of nationalist fervor among Chinese youth cannot be attributed to a single cause, but it is possible to identify some contributing factors. First of all, the patriotic education movement and the Chinese state's emphasis on the primary importance of national unity has strengthened a deep-rooted feeling of loyalty to China, which is ubiquitous among large parts of the Chinese population. This is not necessarily synonymous with loyalty to the CCP, but if we return to the survey from *Global Times* mentioned above, almost half the respondents feel that the interests of the government and the country cannot be separated (*Global Times*, 2013). However, the debates discussed in this article show that criticism of the government easily finds its way into debates on nationalist issues, a tendency that can be expected to grow as the Chinese government juggles nationalist fervor and practical political considerations. Secondly, Globalization and the increased contact with the Western world in the 90s led to a

disillusionment with western values and provided fertile ground for the re-enforcement of traditional Chinese values inherent in the patriotic education campaign. Also, the remembrance of past humiliations at the hands of Western nations and Japan has made perceived slights and differences of opinion as to the interpretation of historical events very pertinent. Finally, the rapid rise of the internet has meant that the young nationalists have found a platform to express their feelings and have been able to dominate the debate – even though there are often more moderate voices to be heard as well. While the internet in China is heavily censored it is still a relatively open platform compared to traditional media, and it is supremely efficient in reaching large audiences at home and abroad quickly thereby escalating the scope of nationalist incidents.

Therefore, the pious wish for the development of a healthy patriotism expressed in the Xinhua quote at the beginning of this article raises more questions than it answers. Nationalism is a strong social force, and by its very nature demands that some of the unresolved issues regarding China's history find a solution – otherwise there will be plenty of fuel for the online nationalist debate in years to come. Using historical imagery in school textbooks, patriotic education bases and across media platform creates loyalty to China, but as I have shown in the debates above, this loyalty takes very different shapes depending on the concrete context and does not necessarily entail a high level of loyalty to the Chinese government. The question then becomes to what extent the current wave of cyber-nationalism will be able to influence the Chinese government in its dealings with the surrounding world – or to put it another way: will the call for rational patriotism from the government and Chinese intellectuals be heard by the young generation? So far, when protests have spilled over from cyberspace into real life, the issues involved have mostly been related to past humiliations. It seems that in order to create the violent fury necessary for these demonstrations to materialize, historical anger is needed to fuel the debate. As long as the Chinese state emphasizes the need for a rational expression of patriotism with one hand, while the other hand continues to fan the nationalist fires by airing historical TV-series with a strong anti-Japanese focus on state television and emphasizing the need to never forget past humiliations in history classes, the double-edged sword that is nationalism in China today will continue to pressure the Chinese Government into a tough stance on any issue related to Japan and other historically sensitive topics. Thus, the pressure that the Chinese government faces on these sensitive issues is partly caused by its own narrative of historical humiliation.



## Notes

<sup>1</sup> <http://english.people.com.cn/90001/90780/91342/7176587.html> (Accessed April 29, 2013).

<sup>2</sup> This story was randomly selected when searching for the term Spratly Islands (*Nansha Qundao*) on Weibo on February 10 (2014) and then selecting one of the most popular stories. Popularity was determined partly by its ranking on Weibo's list of search results, partly by the number of comments. The story and its comments can be found here: [http://www.weibo.com/3921730119/AvOYfAHBI#\\_rnd1392301532807](http://www.weibo.com/3921730119/AvOYfAHBI#_rnd1392301532807).

<sup>3</sup> The source for Figures 1 – 3 is the Weibo debate mentioned above: [http://www.weibo.com/3921730119/AvOYfAHBI#\\_rnd1392301532807](http://www.weibo.com/3921730119/AvOYfAHBI#_rnd1392301532807) (Accessed February 11, 2014).

<sup>4</sup> I have not attempted a quantitative classification of the comments, and the number of comments in each category is by no means intended to be representative of their relative share in the total number of comments in the debate. If anything, the patient comments are overrepresented in my selection. My interest here is solely in the type of arguments/the rhetoric used in the comments, not in what type of comments is most common.

<sup>5</sup> Source: <http://www.douban.com/group/topic/36348268/> (Accessed May 3, 2013).

<sup>6</sup> The comments were selected from the first 20 comments, based on their representativeness and excluding very short or repetitious contributions.

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